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ABSTRACT

The Families, Technology, and Education Conference was held in late 1997, when computer technology and the Internet were raising new issues and concerns as well as presenting new opportunities for parents in work, education, and family life. This introduction to the conference proceedings highlights the issues addressed at the conference, including safety concerns, implications of brain development research, and equity concerns. The introduction suggests that the papers contained in the proceedings indicate that the thoughtful implementation of the new technologies can enhance parents' access to information on, and provide assistance and support in, the task of parenting. (LPP)

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Introduction

Dianne Rothenberg ■

The Families, Technology, and Education Conference was held in late 1997, when computer technology and the Internet were raising new issues and concerns as well as presenting new opportunities for parents in work, education, and family life.

It also came at a time when research findings were often, as they continue to be today, in the public eye. Brain development research findings had been brought to the attention of parents and educators through a recent White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning (April 1997). That conference brought together neuroscientists, policy makers, physicians, parents, and legislators to discuss the growing body of evidence suggesting that the minds of infants are active from birth, that parents and caregivers have major roles to play in early learning and development, and that what parents do in the earliest years affects children's intelligence, curiosity, confidence, and problem-solving abilities. While these research findings offer no new implications for practice and generally support recent insights into children's learning, the current wide dissemination of them is a recent development and one that takes full advantage of the Internet to spread the word to parents.

But brain development research is just one area in which researchers have information to share with parents. There is also a growing research base on the importance of high-quality child care in the lives of young children and the beginnings of a research base on appropriate uses of technology in education. In both of these areas, Internet Web sites and discussion groups also are beginning to play a central role in dissemination of research findings.

As we met from October 30 through November 1 to discuss the intersection of families, technology, and education, we heard from parents, and from those using technology in their programming for and with parents, that there is indeed a connection between understanding and using research findings and the new technologies. As parents try to absorb the results of brain development research and figure out what these findings mean for how they should raise their children, as they read and hear repeatedly that high-quality child care is important for the optimum development of their children, and as they intuitively become advocates for high-level uses of technology in their children's schools, they are also locating, retrieving, and using information in ways that could not have been imagined by parents a generation ago.

In essence, all of us who are parents and grandparents now are learning by trial and error how to adapt to a high-tech world. We are being informed by the new technologies as well as using technology to share our concerns, problems, and questions with a worldwide community of other parents and to communicate with our children and grandchildren. It is a brave new world out there, and parenting is not exempt from the effects of technology.

At the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (ERIC/EECE), we have been learning, through our projects PARENTS AskERIC and the National Parent Information Network, that parents are eager to use the new technologies to find information but that they also need a little help at times to sort through it all. The information overload that we are all

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experiencing at work and at home is particularly hard on parents, who know that a great deal is at stake in raising their children.

The new technologies also seem to have raised concerns about our children's safety in an online world. How can we help and guide them as they navigate the World Wide Web—a resource that is highly interactive and engaging, yet one that can also pose dangers to them? This is a major concern of many parents, especially those of older children and adolescents. Of course, the Internet can also be misused. It offers not only some objectionable sites, but much that can waste valuable time. It can distract us and our children from the many worthwhile tasks upon which we should be spending our time. Concerned parents told us at the FTE Conference that they try many kinds of filtering techniques to combat these problems—perhaps most commonly software filtering agents. But filters are imperfect, at best, and won't necessarily be found on the neighbor's computer. Software filters also don't teach children why their parents don't want them to be exposed to certain kinds of situations. The best filter is a parent sitting with a child—of any age—who is using the Internet. Parents are learning that the Internet is not a babysitter; nor is it always a safe place to visit unaccompanied by a caring adult.

Conference participants discussed the faults of the Internet as well as the potential offered by it and other new technologies to improve family life. At the same time, the Internet continues to affect profoundly our thinking, our language, and how we communicate. It is sometimes difficult to keep in mind that the changes technology has introduced are just the beginning of a long cycle of social change that will be pushed by advances in technology. We can expect, for example, that while reading will remain the primary adult skill needed to function well in our society, the printed page will begin to occupy a slightly different role. I can imagine a day when parents and children will take their lightweight notebook computers to the library and download books onto them, and the books will simply erase themselves from the computer on the date they are due back at the library. The computers will be so light, the resolution will be so clear, and they will be so indestructible, that parents and children will be able to read at the beach or in bed just as they always have.

The greatest concern expressed at the FTE Conference about the new technologies and their role in family life was equity. It is likely that equity concerns will diminish over time, as computers and the Internet become more integrated into our daily environments. Already, many public libraries and other agencies in Illinois, for example, provide public access terminals with Internet access for the general public at no fee. At ERIC/EECE, we encourage schools to open their computer labs to the parents and neighbors on whose funding they clearly depend. Communities will continue to find creative ways to increase access to the new information technologies for all of us. As one example, the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science recently received a large federal grant to collect 1,000 outdated computers from local businesses and, with the help of teenagers from low-income families working with graduate students, upgrade or rebuild those computers. Each teenager who takes part in the program gets to take a computer home, and the rest are being distributed throughout the community to low-income families and organizations.

Such efforts are significant and widespread in many communities across the nation. Decreases in the cost of equipment are also likely to continue, and new kinds of technologies, such as Web TV and access to the Internet through cable television, will become very inexpensive and very common at all levels of society. Parents who take part in our online discussions equate Internet access and use with power and influence in our society. One of their most cogent hopes as expressed at the FTE meeting was for greater access to the Internet for all families in all parts of the community. As the FTE Conference papers contained in this volume show, the thoughtful implementation of the new technologies can enhance parents' access to information on, and provide assistance and support in, the task of parenting.